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Expert doubts Soviet 'first strike'

By Bill Gertz
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Nuclear war with the Soviet Union is more likely to result from the escalation of a regional conflict than from a surprise Soviet "first strike," according the Pentagon's top civilian expert on the conduct of nuclear war.

Assistant Defense Secretary Donald C. Latham doubts Soviet leaders would risk a nuclear first strike since their main concern is preserving the communist system.

"I tend to discount the notion that a global strategic nuclear war will come out of some strike out of the blue, some totally surprise situation," Mr. Latham said in an interview. "I think if it ever does occur, and I hope it doesn't, that it would escalate to some sort of a strategic exchange out of some regional conflict that started earlier."

Such a scenario would be the result of a "natural" escalation of violence, he said.

"Can you manage that violence?" he asked. "I think it can be managed in the sense you can control what's launched, the numbers that have been launched, the targets you want to attack, the ability to launch a second strike or a third strike — I think that can 'be managed.'

"Will there be incredible, unbelievable destruction? Yes. It's something you want to avoid at all costs. There are no winners in that."

Mr. Latham has directed the Reagan administration's program for upgrading the military command system for conducting warfare — a system he views as an essential component of deterring the Soviets from using nuclear weapons.

He stated that U.S. deterrent strategy requires a credible system for operating U.S. military forces under nuclear war conditions. As part of that strategy, U.S. war planners have taken into account what Mr. Latham described as the "overriding goal" of protecting communist leaders and the Marxist-Leninist system.

"When somebody decides to bet his homeland — and that's what you've done when you launch a nuclear weapon against the other guy — you just bet your whole system of things, [and] the thing that they cherish most in the Soviet Union is . . . their whole leaderhsip mechanism and the Communist Party to boot," Mr. Latham said. "It's well known they've taken extraordinary steps to protect the leadership."

After a five-year, multibillion dollar U.S. modernization program, new high-technology systems of warning sensors, communications links and command posts are just now beginning to replace older and obsolete systems, Mr. Latham said.

"I regard a robust, survivable and enduring system as an integral part of deterrence," he said.

Mr. Latham is in charge of the Pentagon's command, control, communications and intelligence operation — called C³I ("C" cubed "I"). He called it "the glue that holds all of this stuff together — from the warning sensors through the command and control networks to the weapons themselves."

Research and engineering of modern C³I systems began more than five years ago and is now entering the production stage with high technology hardware "pouring out the door" over the next several years, Mr. Latham said.

Mr. Latham was appointed to the post in 1981 and has been charged with the task of providing U.S. leaders with options necessary for protecting the country against nuclear attack and using the U.S. ground-, air- and sea-based nuclear arsenal.

He is responsible for making sure the United States is capable of waging nuclear war. War scenarios range from possibile regional conflicts precipitating a nuclear exchange to an arsenal-killing "first strike" requiring a critical "launch-on-warning" counterattack against a surprise Soviet missile strike aimed at knocking out U.S. land-based weapons in their silos.

"A potential adversary has got to always worry that you could possibly launch on warning if you wanted to," said Mr. Latham. "The Soviets have announced that they are capable of doing that — that's a very dangerous posture."

He would not say if launch-on-warning was a U.S. option but stressed that it is not the preferred state of readiness.

A Soviet submarine-launched nuclear missile could strike the United States in 10 minutes, leaving about five minutes to set in motion a defensive command strategy, Mr. Latham said. More accurate land-based Soviet ICBMs would arrive about 20 to 30 minutes later.

As part of the command modernization program, Defense Department officials convinced the White House to move the president's airborne command post from Andrews Air Force Base to a safer location inland, Mr. Latham said. Four new flying command posts have been deployed, he said.

Funding devoted to a comprehensive modernization program for the command, control and communications systems rose from $9.9 billion in fiscal year 1981 to $22.1 billion in the current funding cycle and is now 7 percent of the overall Pentagon budget, Mr. Latham said.

U.S. funds for intelligence programs also rose sharply, he said, although the funds were included in classified intelligence budgets. Experts estimate the total U.S. intelligence community annual budget to be somewhere between $15 billion to $20 billion, making the total C³I funding somewhere between $37 billion and $42 billion.

The Pentagon expects to request from Congress "very substantial" increases in C³I funds in the administration's next budget, although Mr. Latham said without specifying, that the increases would be less than in previous years.

"What you're starting to see are the results of research and development efforts . . . really starting to pay off with hardware pouring out the door," Mr. Latham said. "In the next four years, you going to see voluminous amount of C³ hardware hit the road."

Mr. Latham reeled off a host of new C³I systems, including the deployement this year of a global nuclear detection system that will provide instant notice of any above-ground nuclear detonations,

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the deployment of a complete new communications system for the U.S. Army, a program to "harden" U.S. satellite communications against attack and deployment of new relay transmitters and new missile detection radars.

For communicating with nuclear submarines, the Pentagon has begun to build two squadrons of airborne communications aircraft that will allow commanders to send orders to submarines over long distances. A new system of extremely low-frequency transmitters is expected to be deployed this year with the completion of a transmitter in Wisconsin.

"That allows you to keep your [submarine] force at a high level of alert and in contact with the shore at all times," Mr. Latham said.

One submarine communications system Mr. Latham described as "a way-out possibility" is a space-based, blue-green laser communication system. It uses light beams to penetrate sea water "to some depth" with a command message at a fairly high data rate, he said.

"A more tactical version is to put a laser on an aircraft and signal a submarine that way," Mr. Latham said. "We've successfully done that several times."

He said a "key determinant" of the decision to deploy space communications lasers is whether they can be protected against Soviet attack.

The Pentagon also has modernized its security procedures for protecting nuclear weapons against accidential detonation or theft by terrorists, Mr. Latham said.

"That area has received extraordinary attention, and I mean very high-level, in-depth attention to make sure that the nuclear command and control system does two things," Mr. Latham said. "No. 1, it assures against the unauthorized, inadvertent use of a weapon of any kind; but, on the other hand it also assures that if the president so decided, under whatever set of circumstances, that he needed to launch nuclear weapons, they could, in fact, be used."

To prevent terrorists from stealing a nuclear device, new security procedures have been set up at weapons facilities and if a nuclear weapon were ever stolen, an elaborate technical locking mechanism would prevent a terrorist from setting it off, Mr. Latham said.